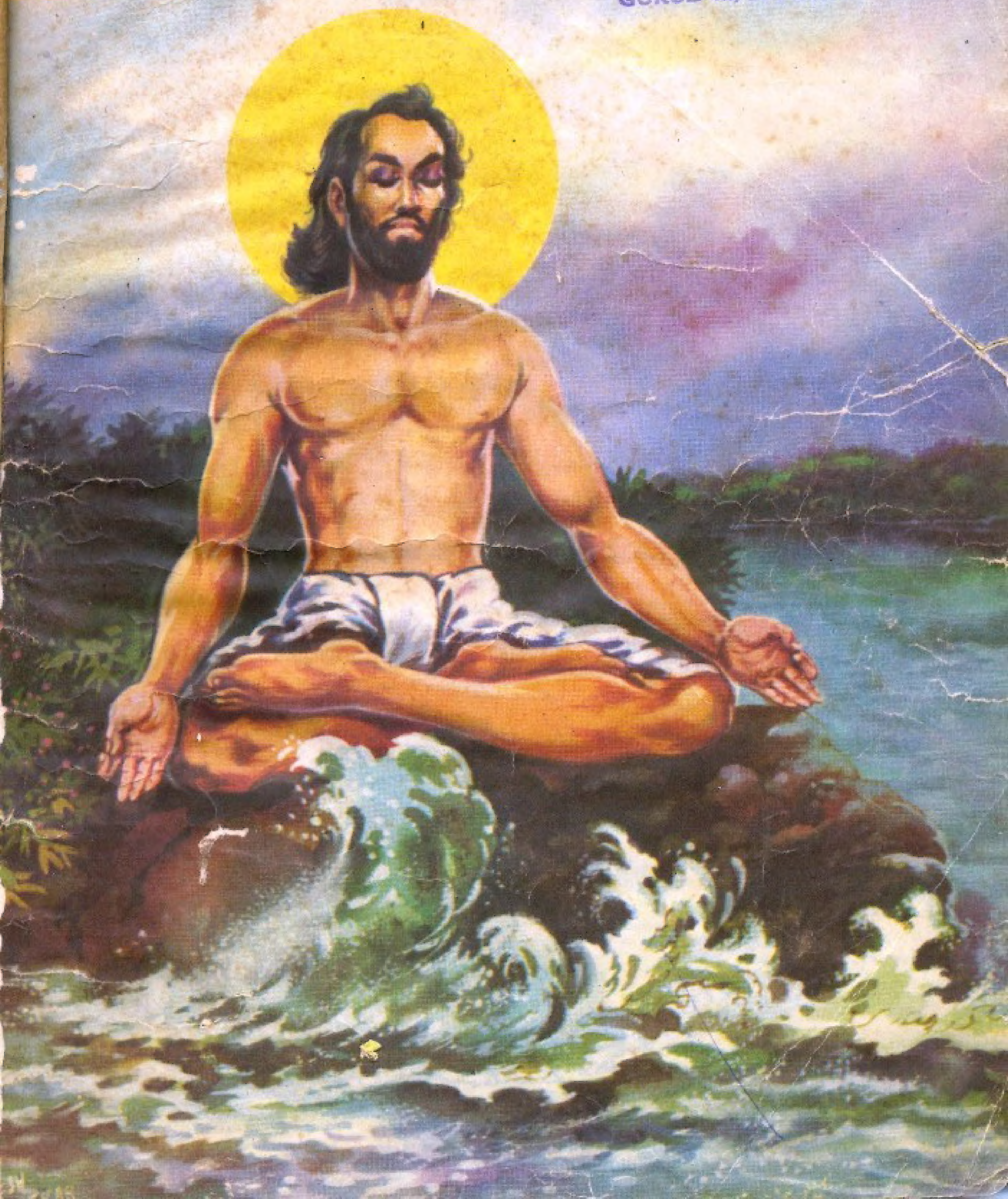
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Guru Ravidas

Guru Ravidas (c. A.D. 1450-1540) was the son of a cobbler who lived in the village of Mandua Deeh near Varanasi. He is also known as Raidas, Rohidas, Ruidas and so on.

Very few authenticated facts of his life are known. His extant poems give us an idea, however hazy, of the poet-saint who attained union with God. It is said that Kabir, Nanak, Dhanna and Meera were his contemporaries and that when he was very old, Guru Nanak, then a young man, came to pay his respects to him.

Ravidas' philosophy is a blend of the different faiths and beliefs of his day. He considered differentiation between man and man on grounds of caste, religion and worldly possessions as artificial and exhorted his followers—commonly known as Ravidasis—to strive for a classless society. Ravidas renounced the comforts of the world but not his worldly duties. He did not live on alms, as other saints did, but earned his living as a shoe-maker. Obviously Ravidas firmly believed in the sanctity of honest labour.

The following pages tell the story of Ravidas based mainly on his poems.

*

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GURU RAVIDAS

AT KASHI, A DEVOUT COUPLE CAME EVERY MORNING FOR A HOLY DIP IN THE GANGA AND THEY UTTERED BUT ONE PRAYER.

O SURYA, MIGHTIER THAN ALL, GRANT US A CHILD.

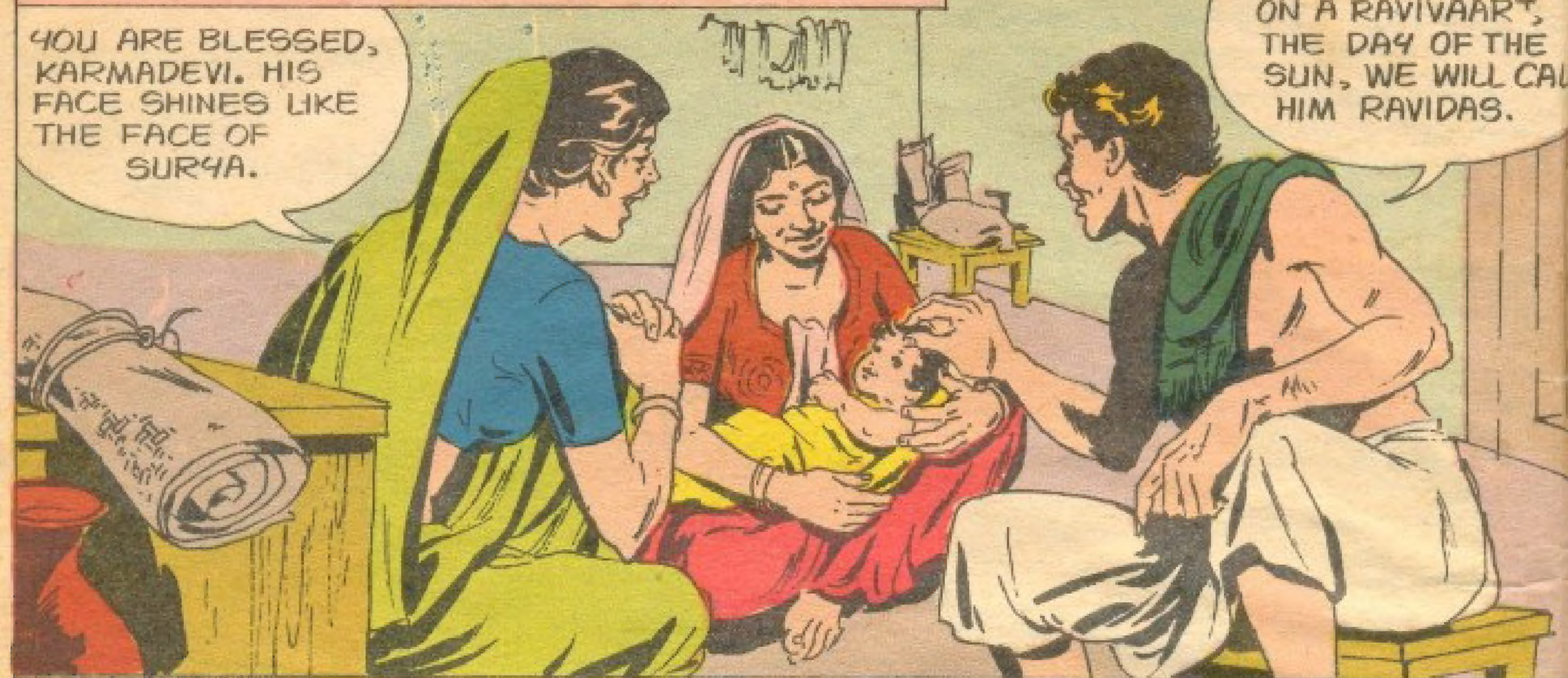
O GREAT RAVI*, MAY A CHILD BE BORN TO US.

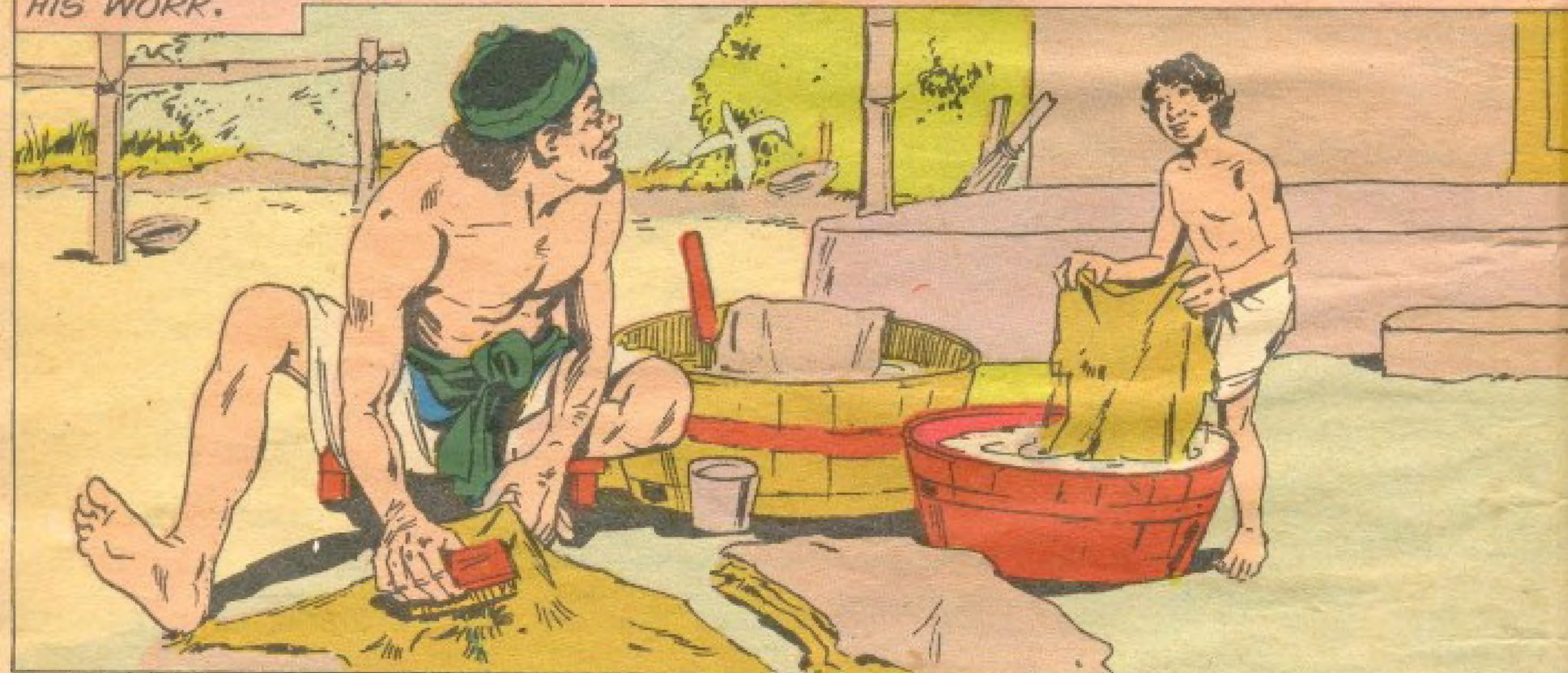
YOU SHALL HAVE YOUR WISH.

SANDAN SWAMI...

REJOICE, GOOD PEOPLE, FOR A SON IS SOON TO BE BORN TO YOU.

* ANOTHER NAME FOR THE SUN GOD.

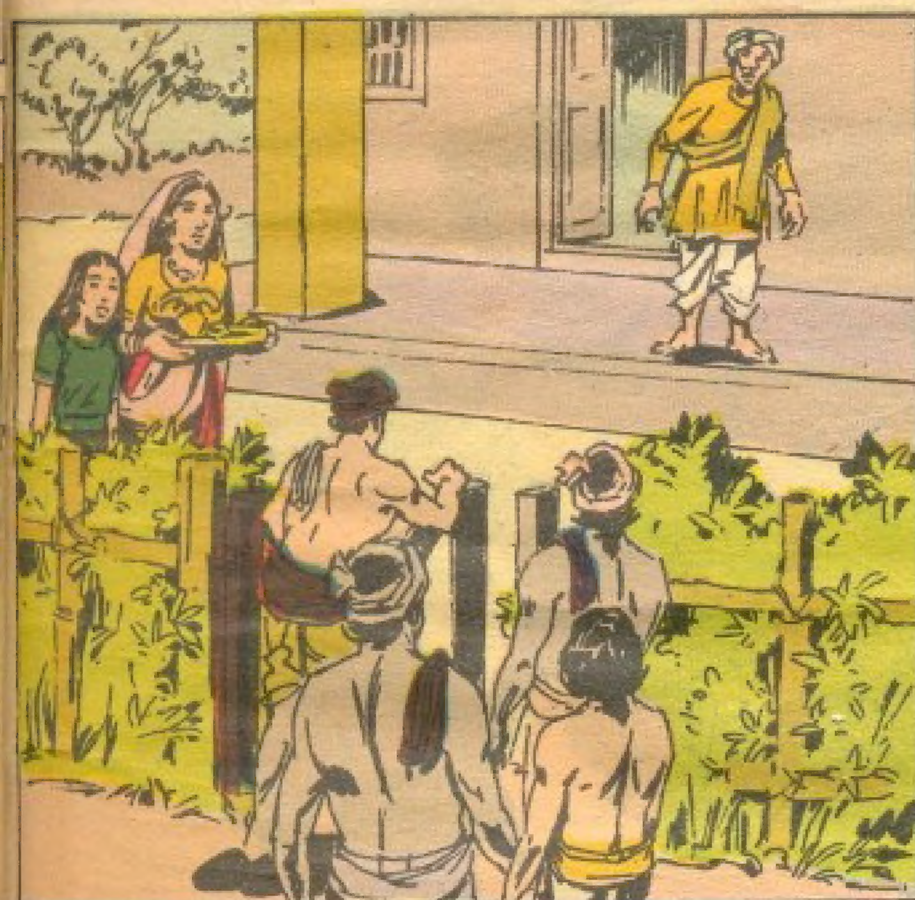






+ SUNDAY. * COBBLERS


TWO OF MY BULLOCKS DIED TODAY. TAKE THEM AWAY.
YES, SIR. AT ONCE!




WAIT! WAIT!


DO YOU WANT TO BE POLLUTED? MOVE ON. GET INTO THE HOUSE. QUICK.

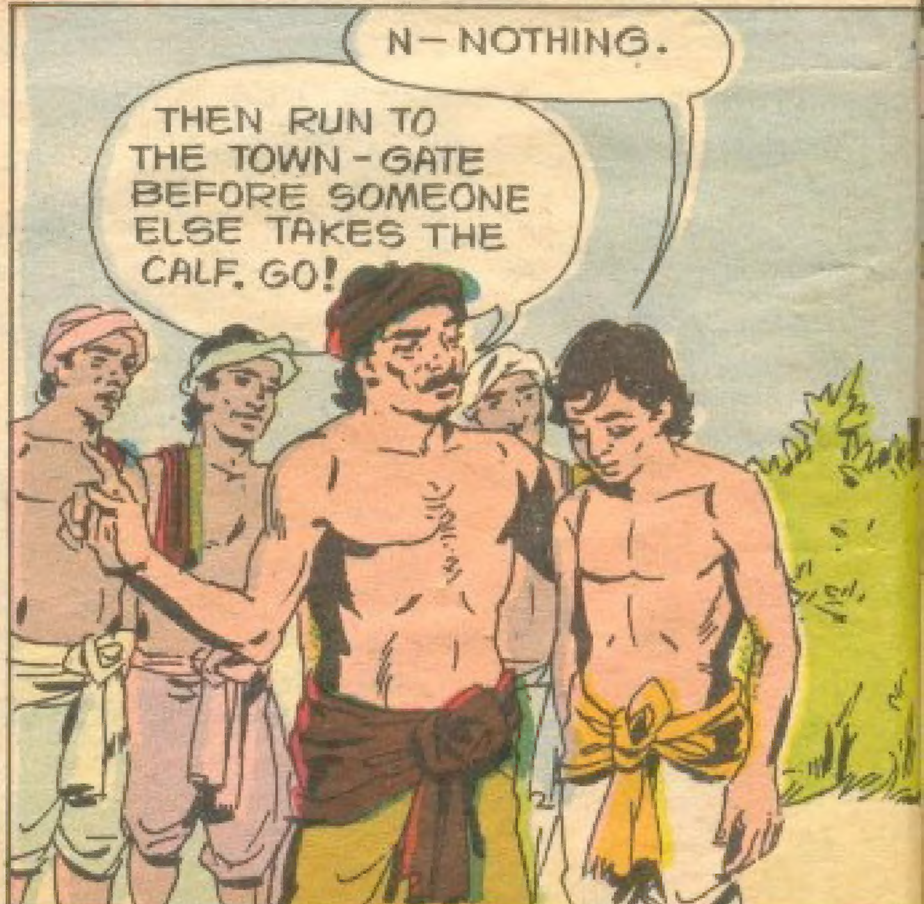




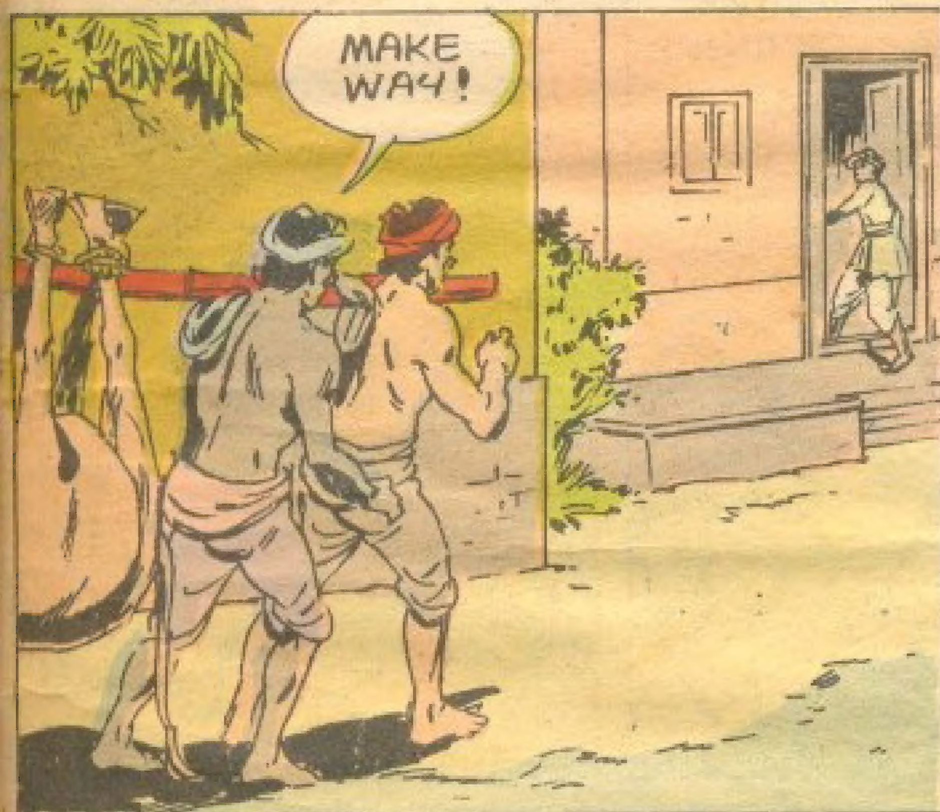

JUST THEN, ANOTHER CHAMAR CAME UP.
SON, WE WILL HANDLE THE BULLOCKS. YOU GO TO THE TOWN-GATE. THERE IS A DEAD CALF THERE WHICH WILL BE EASY FOR YOU TO CARRY.


RAVIDAS, DID YOU HEAR ME?


WHAT'S THE MATTER WITH YOU?
UH...? WHAT? WHAT DID YOU SAY?


N-NOTHING.
THEN RUN TO THE TOWN-GATE BEFORE SOMEONE ELSE TAKES THE CALF. GO!


SOON, THE CHAMARS WERE READY TO GO BACK TO THEIR VILLAGE.
MAKE WAY!
MAKE WAY!


MAKE WAY!

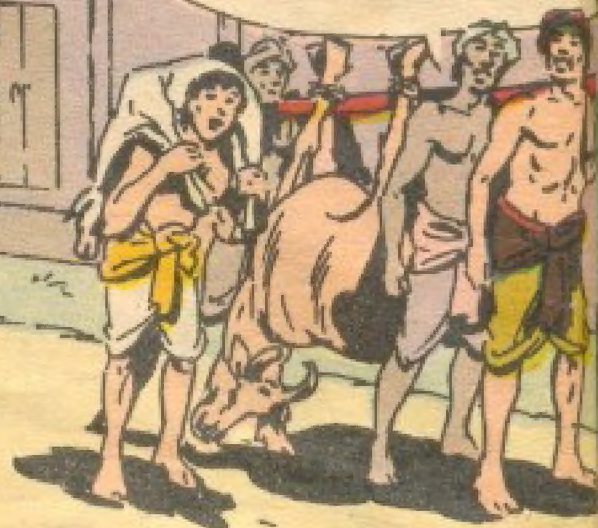

SLAM


SUDDENLY—
SHIVA-SHIVA! CHAMARS!




POLLUTERS! TRAFFICKERS IN DEAD ANIMALS! COULDN'T YOU HAVE SHOUTED THAT YOU WERE COMING?




BUT WE DID! SO WHILE WE DID OUR BIT, YOU DIDN'T DO YOURS, HOLY ONE! YOU DIDN'T HEAR US.

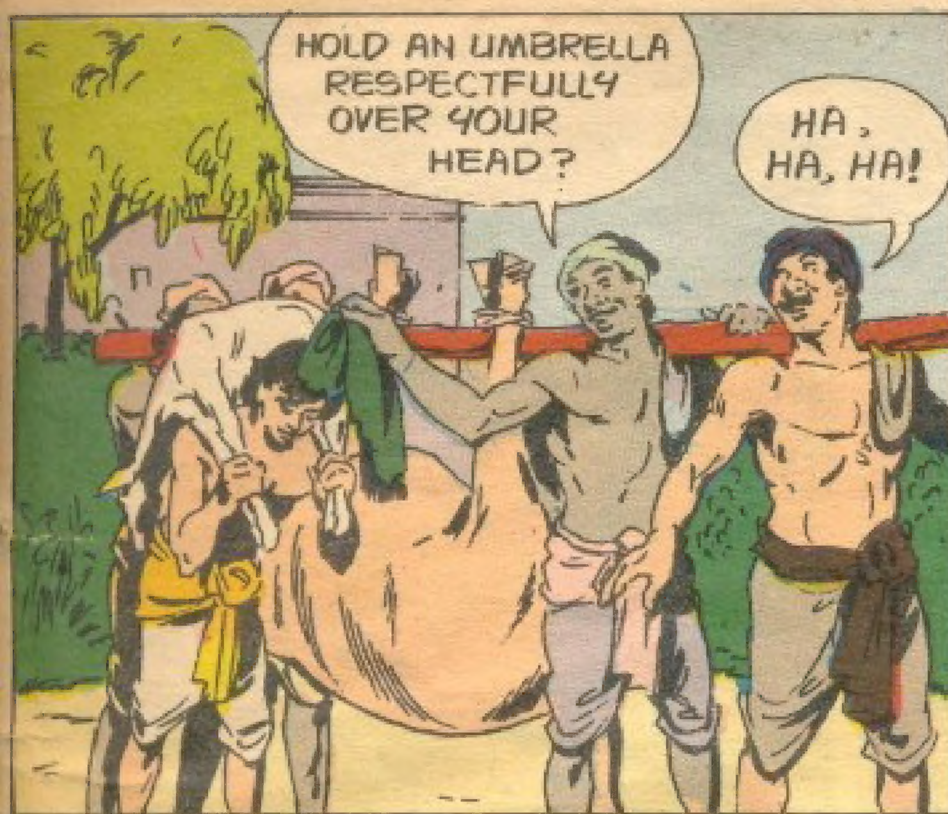



RAVIDAS CRYING?


BUT WHY? SURELY NOT BECAUSE...


RAVIDAS! YOU ARE A CHAMAR, BOY!


WHAT DO YOU EXPECT PEOPLE TO DO? BOW BEFORE YOU?


HOLD AN UMBRELLA RESPECTFULLY OVER YOUR HEAD?
HA, HA, HA!

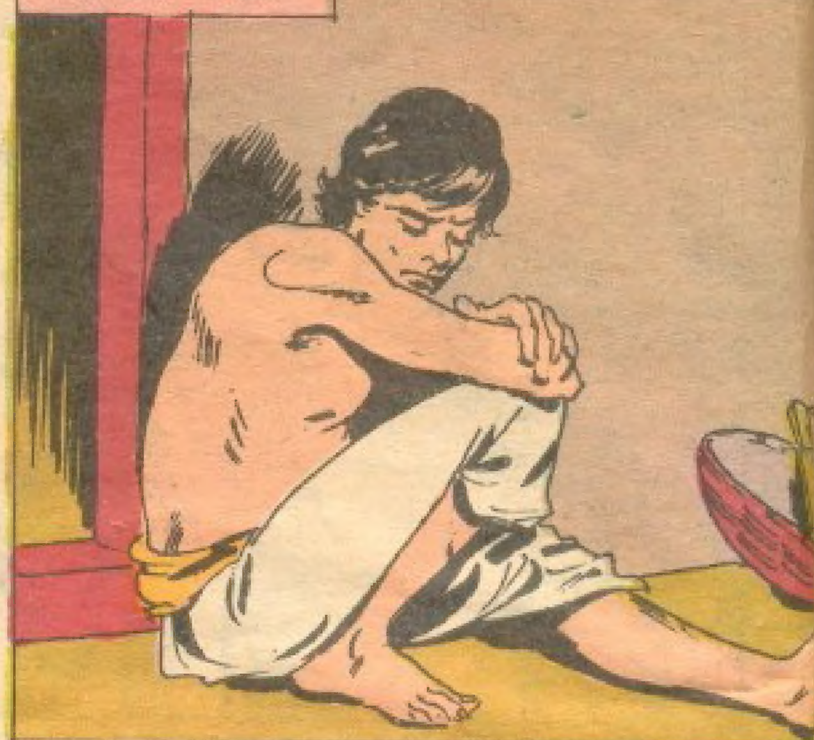

COME ON, CHEER UP!
CHEER UP! SMILE!


HOW CAN YOU LAUGH WHEN INSULTS ARE HEAPED UPON US LIKE THIS? ARE WE NOT SUPPOSED TO HAVE ANY FEELINGS?
RAVIDAS, YOU DON'T KNOW HOW WE BURN WITHIN!

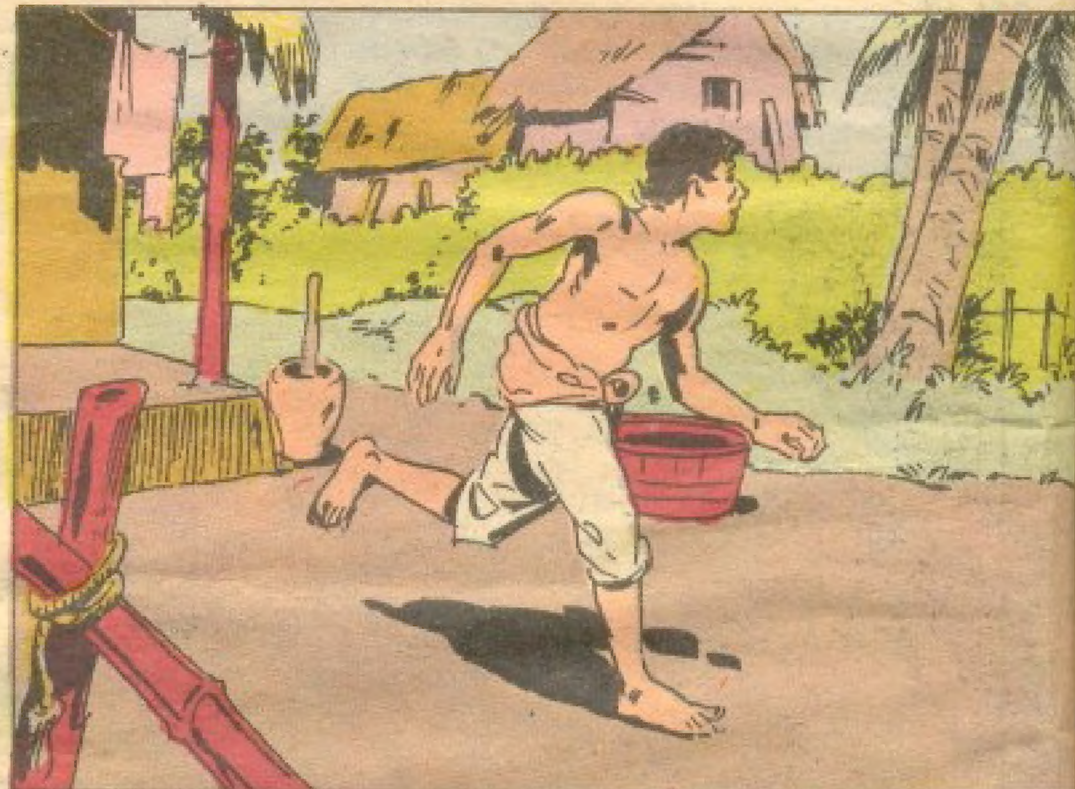

IF WE SHOW A SMILING FACE TO THE WORLD, IT'S BECAUSE IT LESSENS OUR PAIN. TEARS WON'T HELP US... NEVER!


BUT HOW LONG WILL WE SUFFER... SUFFER WITH A SMILE?

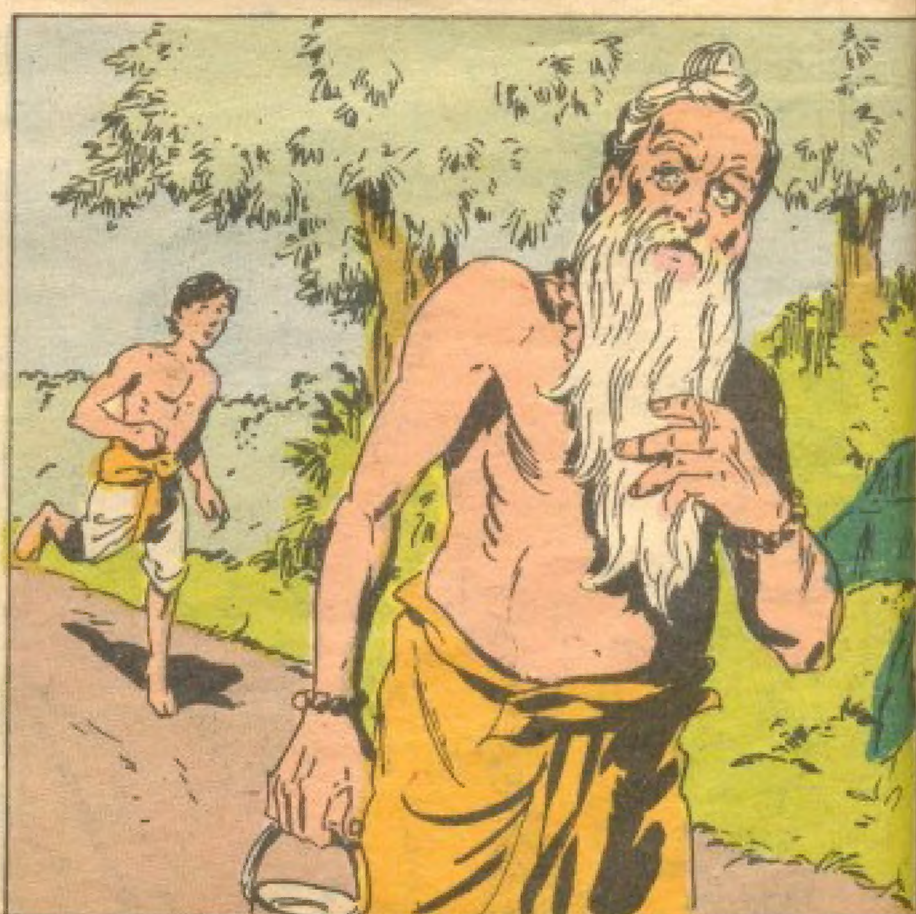

FROM THAT DAY ON, RAVIDAS STOPPED GOING OUT ALTOGETHER.
RAVIDAS, COME. LET'S GO TO VARANASI.
I...I'M NOT COMING.


ALL DAY HE SAT, LOST IN HIS OWN THOUGHTS.


SUDDENLY, ONE DAY —










COME FORWARD, SON.


AH, SO IT IS YOU!


SWAMIJI, I... I WANT TO KNOW ABOUT MYSELF AND ABOUT THE GOD WHO CREATED ME.


IT IS THE SAME THING, RAVIDAS. WHEN YOU KNOW YOURSELF, YOU WILL KNOW GOD.


SANDAN SWAMI ACCEPTED RAVIDAS AS ONE OF HIS DISCIPLES.
RAVIDAS, GOD CREATED MA
AND MEN FORGETTING THE ONE
HAND THAT CREATED THEM
ALL, SURVEYED THEIR OWN
HANDS AND THE WORK
THAT THEY DID.


AND ACCORDING TO THE WORK THEY DID, THEY CLASSIFIED THEMSELVES AND GAVE EACH OTHER LABELS.


CHAMAR, BRAHMA
SHUDRA, ARE THE
MEANINGLESS LABELS INVENTED BY IGNORANT MEN.


SEE YOURSELF AS YOU ARE. DO NOT SEE YOURSELF BY THE LABEL.


SEE ... MYSELF ... AS I AM ... SEE MYSELF ... AS I AM ...


IN THE DAYS THAT FOLLOWED, A CHANGE CAME OVER RAVIDAS.


A CHAMAR!... YOU FOOL, HOW DARE YOU CROSS MY...


...MY... ER...




IN SEEING HIMSELF AS HE WAS, RAVIDAS HAD FORGOTTEN THE CHAMAR HE WAS SUPPOSED TO BE.


AND AS HE GREW TO KNOW HIMSELF...


... HE BEGAN TO SEE HIMSELF IN OTHERS.

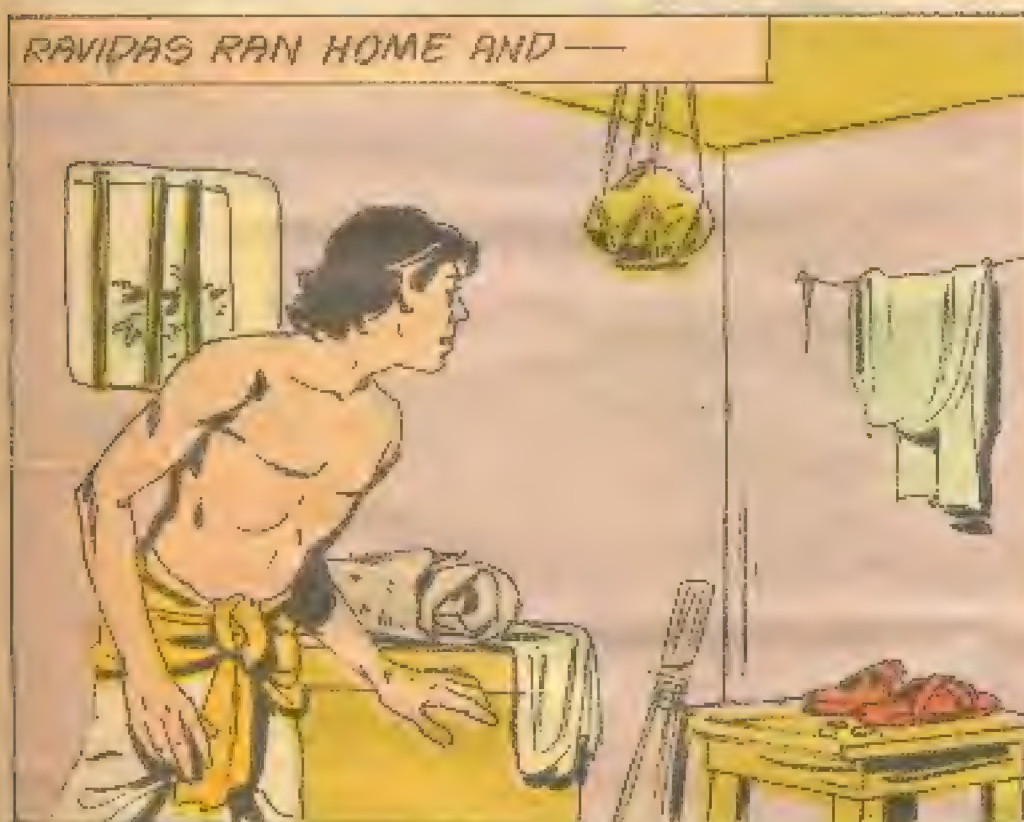

MOTHER, PLEASE ACCEPT THIS FOOD.
BUT WHAT ABOUT YOU, CHILD?


OH, I... I... I HAVE ALREADY EATEN.
THEN I WILL TAKE IT. THANK YOU, MY CHILD.


AND SO IT BEGAN! ONE DAY —


SIRS, PLEASE ACCEPT THESE SANDALS.
THAT IS KIND OF YOU, MY BOY.


AS HE WALKED AWAY —

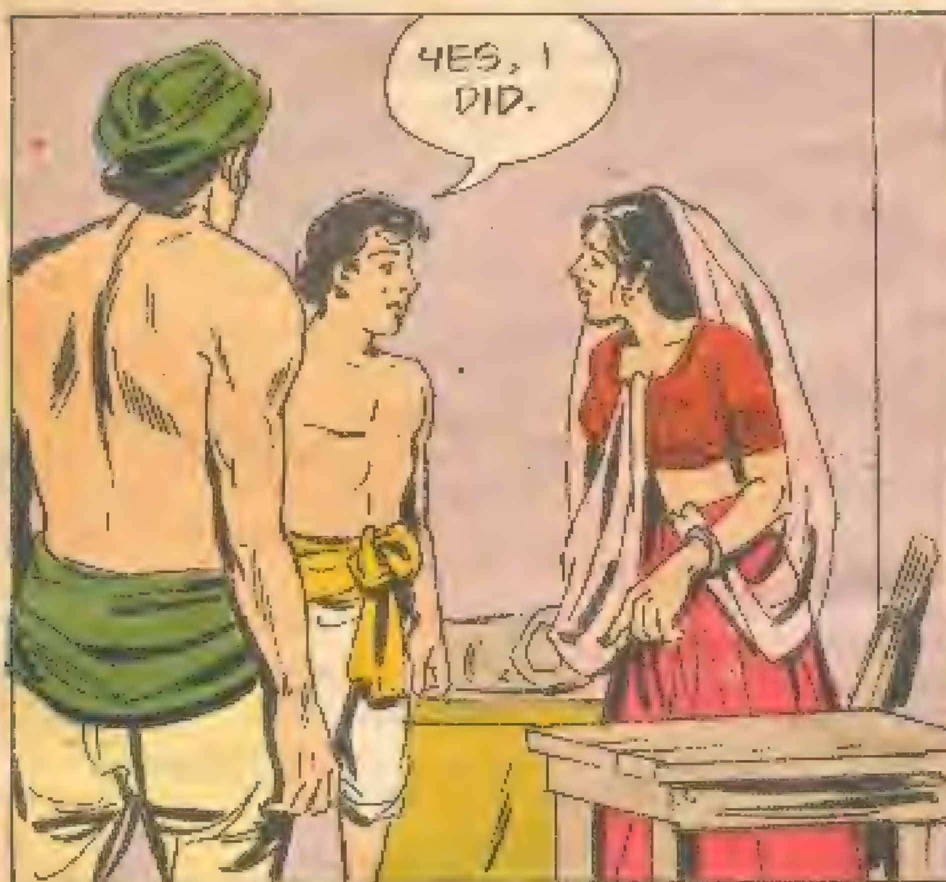

RAVIDAS RAN HOME AND —




THEN HE RAN BACK TO THE WOMAN.
PLEASE TAKE THIS MONEY AND BUY THE CHILD SOME MILK ...
MAY GOD BLESS YOU FOR THINKING OF THE NEEDY.


... AND KEEP THESE SANDALS TOO.


WHEN RAVIDAS RETURNED HOME —
RAVIDAS, YOU TOOK THE SANDALS AND MONEY JUST NOW, DIDN'T YOU?

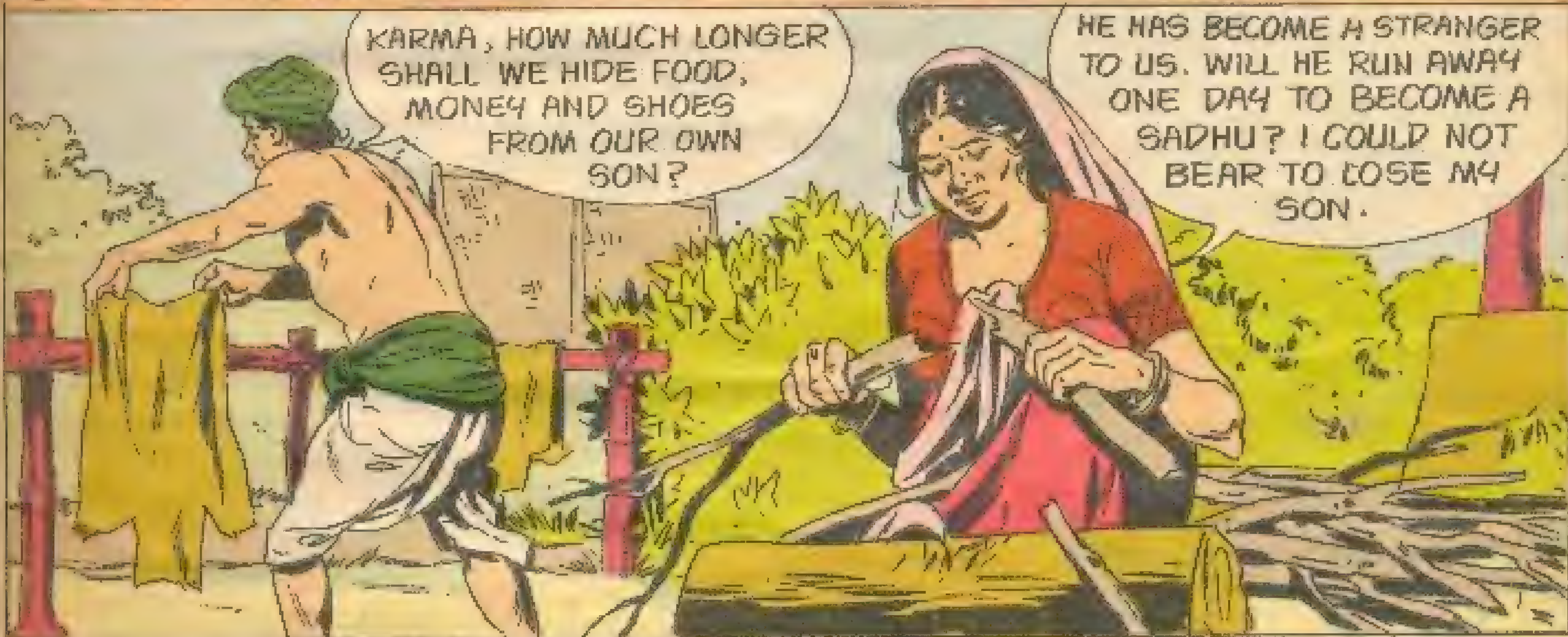

YES, I DID.


WHERE ARE THEY, SON?
I GAVE THEM TO A POOR WOMAN.


WAS IT PROPER OF YOU TO HAVE GIVEN OUR EARNINGS AWAY?
YOU KNOW THAT WE OURSELVES HAVE BARELY ENOUGH TO LIVE ON.


MOTHER, HER NEED WAS GREATER THAN OURS.
HIS PARENTS STOOD SILENT, HAVING NOTHING TO SAY TO THAT.



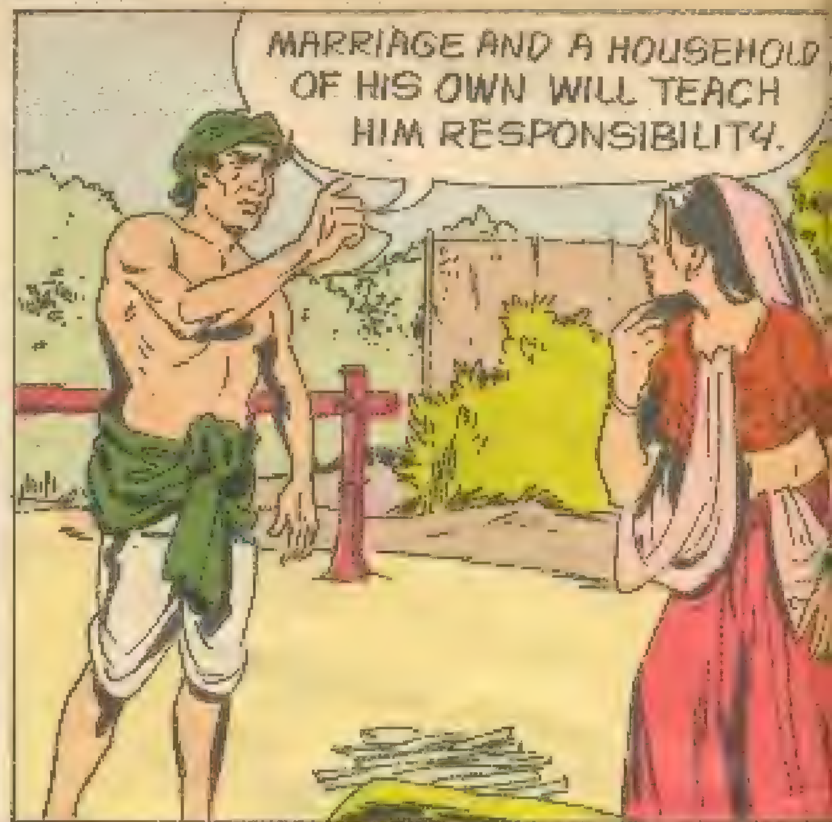






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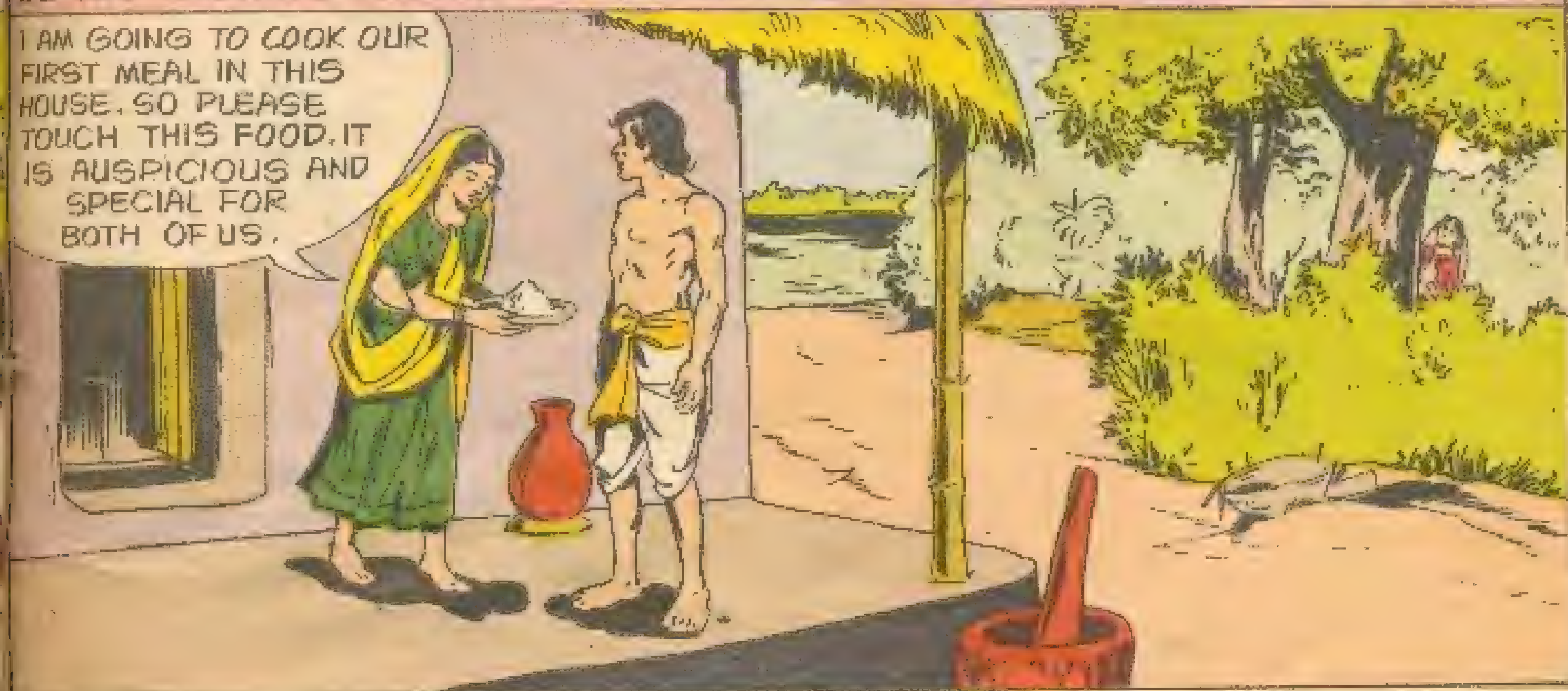


SO, BEFORE LONG, RAVIDAS WAS MARRIED TO BHAGWATI...



...AND THEY WENT TO LIVE IN A SEPAR HOUSE BUT CLOSE TO THAT OF HIS PARENTS.

THE NEXT DAY, WHEN RAVIDAS' MOTHER WENT TO VISIT THEM, SHE PAUSED A WHILE BEFORE SHOWING HERSELF AND WATCHED HER SON AND DAUGHTER-IN-LAW.









JUST THEN—




ALAKH NIRANJAN!


BHAGWATI, GOD HAS BEEN GOOD. HE HAS GIVEN US THE OPPORTUNITY TO PUT THIS FOOD TO THE BEST USE.


BUT... BUT OUR FIRST MEAL.


HOLY SIRS, PLEASE ACCEP THIS.

OH, RAVIDAS!

RAVIDAS AND BHAGWATI CONTINUED TO LIVE IN THEIR HUT. BUT SOON BHAGWATI NOTICED THAT THE SENSITIVE MAN WHO WAS HER HUSBAND WAS GROWING MORE AND MORE WITHDRAWN; MORE AND MORE SILENT.



ONE DAY, WHEN SHE RETURNED FROM THE FOREST WITH A LOAD OF FIREWOOD, SHE SAW RAVIDAS SITTING UNDER A TREE.



SHE CAME AND HID BEHIND IT TO SURPRISE HIM WHEN —







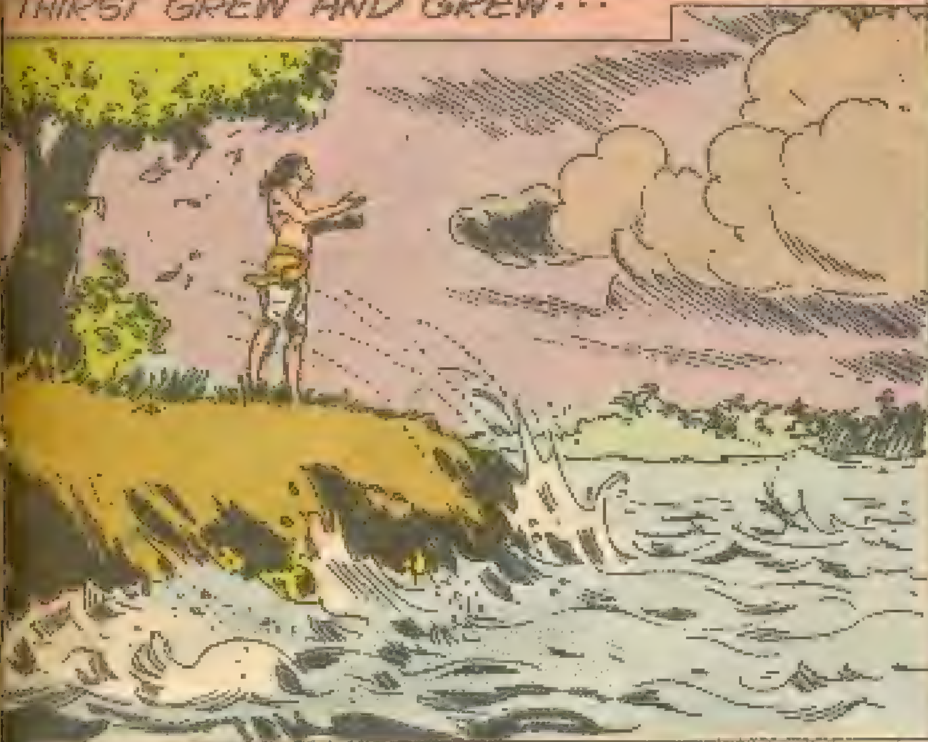

YOU ARE THE SANDAL-PASTE, I, THE WATER... YOU ARE THE LAMP, I THE WICK...


YOU ARE THE THREAD, LORD; I, THE PEARLS STRUNG UPON IT.
LORD?


LORD! LORD
IT'S GOD! H
VERSES AR
TO GOD!


BHAGWATI WENT AND SAT NEAR RAVIDAS.
YOUR VERSES ARE SO BEAUTIFUL, SO SIMPLE. I TOO WILL LEARN AND SING THEM.

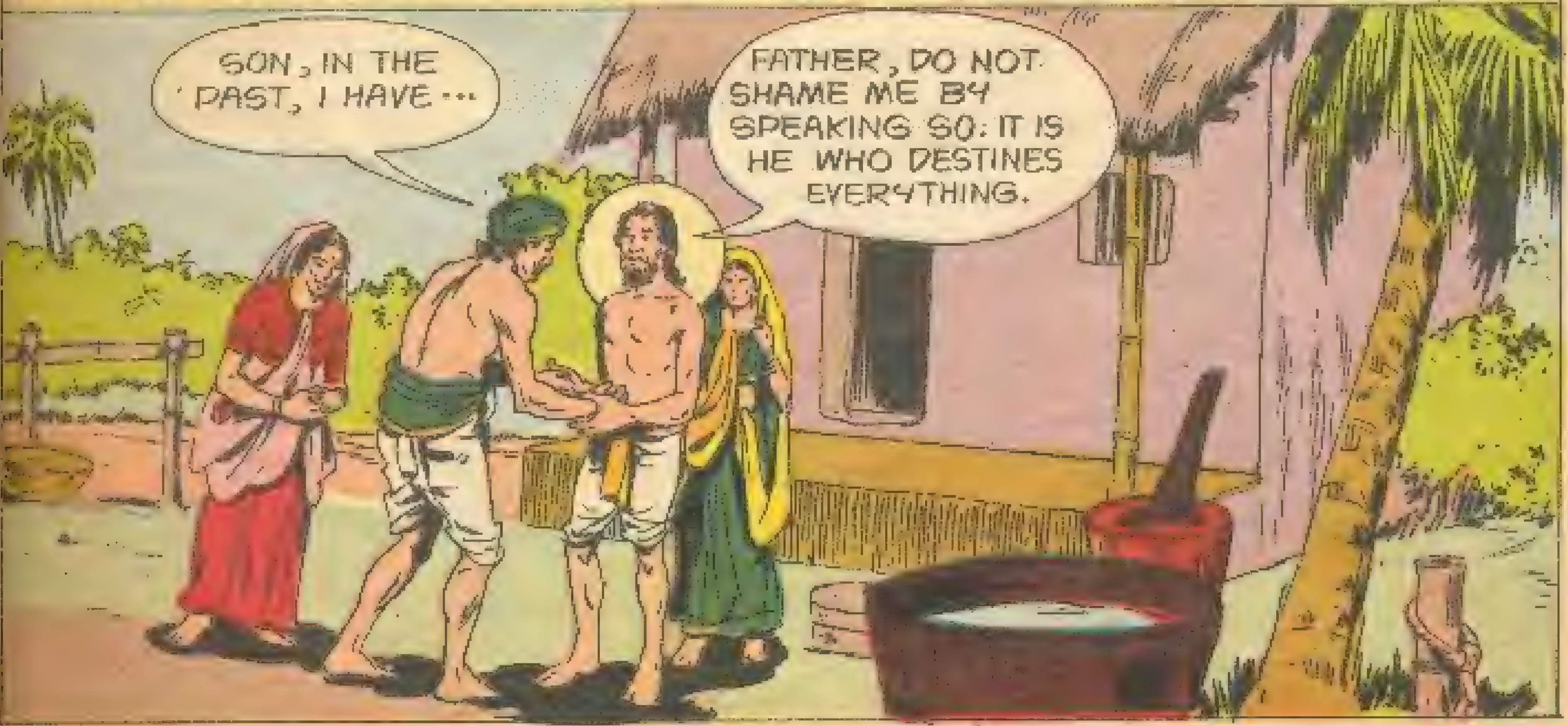

ONE DAY, I
KNOW THE
WHOLE WORL
WILL SING
THEM.


AFTER THIS, DAY AFTER DAY, RAVIDAS' THIRST GREW AND GREW...


...TILL AT LAST, IT WAS QUENCHED.





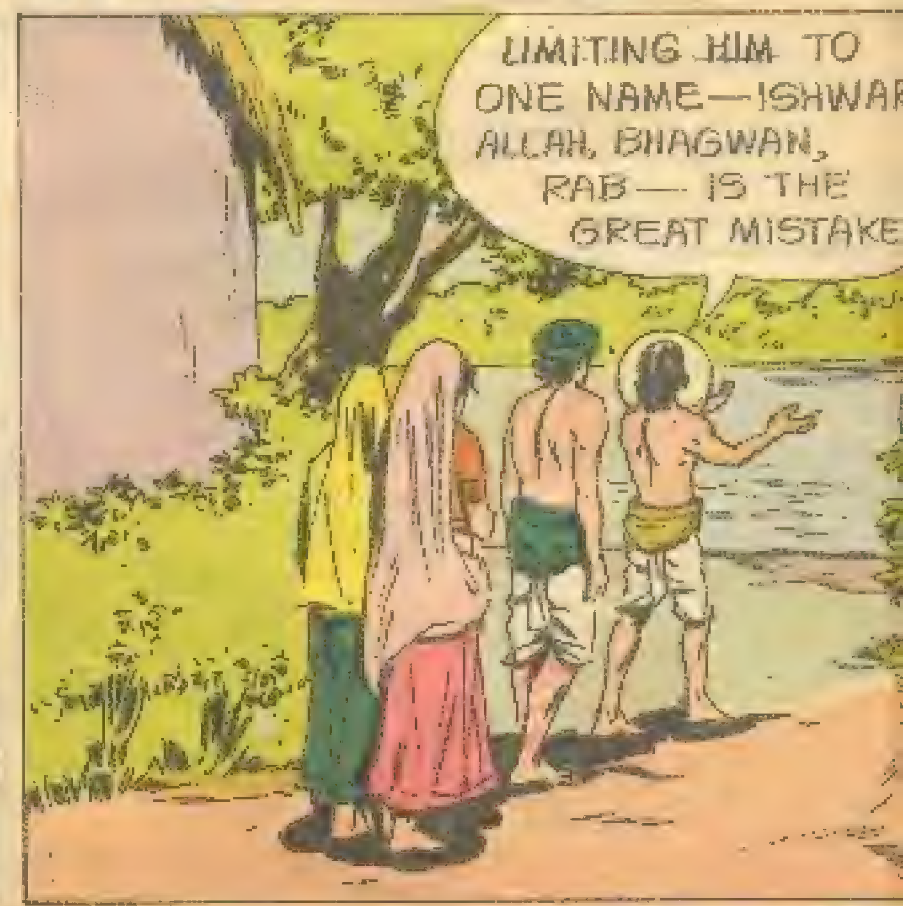

AND WHO SHOULD FIRST NOTICE IT, BUT RAGHAV, KARMADEVI AND BHAGWATI?
SON, IN THE PAST, I HAVE...
FATHER, DO NOT SHAME ME BY SPEAKING SO: IT IS HE WHO DESTINES EVERYTHING.


YOU ARE NOW BOTH SON AND
TEACHER TO US. TELL US, WHO
IS GOD? IS HE NOT THE ONE
ON THE ALTAR?
YES, HE IS ON THE ALTAR...


...BUT SO IS HE HERE...


...AND THERE.


BUT IF YOU SEE GOD ONLY IN THE IDOL AND CLOSE YOUR EYES TO HIM WHO IS IN ALL PLACES AND IN ALL THINGS, THE IDOL IS STANDING BETWEEN YOU AND GOD.


LIMITING HIM TO
ONE NAME—ISHWAR
ALLAH, BHAGWAN,
RAB— IS THE
GREAT MISTAKE







AS RAVIDAS' FAME SPREAD, PEOPLE CAME TO SEEK HIS ADVICE AND GUIDANCE; PEOPLE BOTH OLD AND YOUNG WHOSE SELF-RESPECT HAD BEEN BROKEN BY CASTE.




HOLY SIR, YOU ARE GREAT ENOUGH NOT TO BE AFFECTED BY CASTE, BUT...

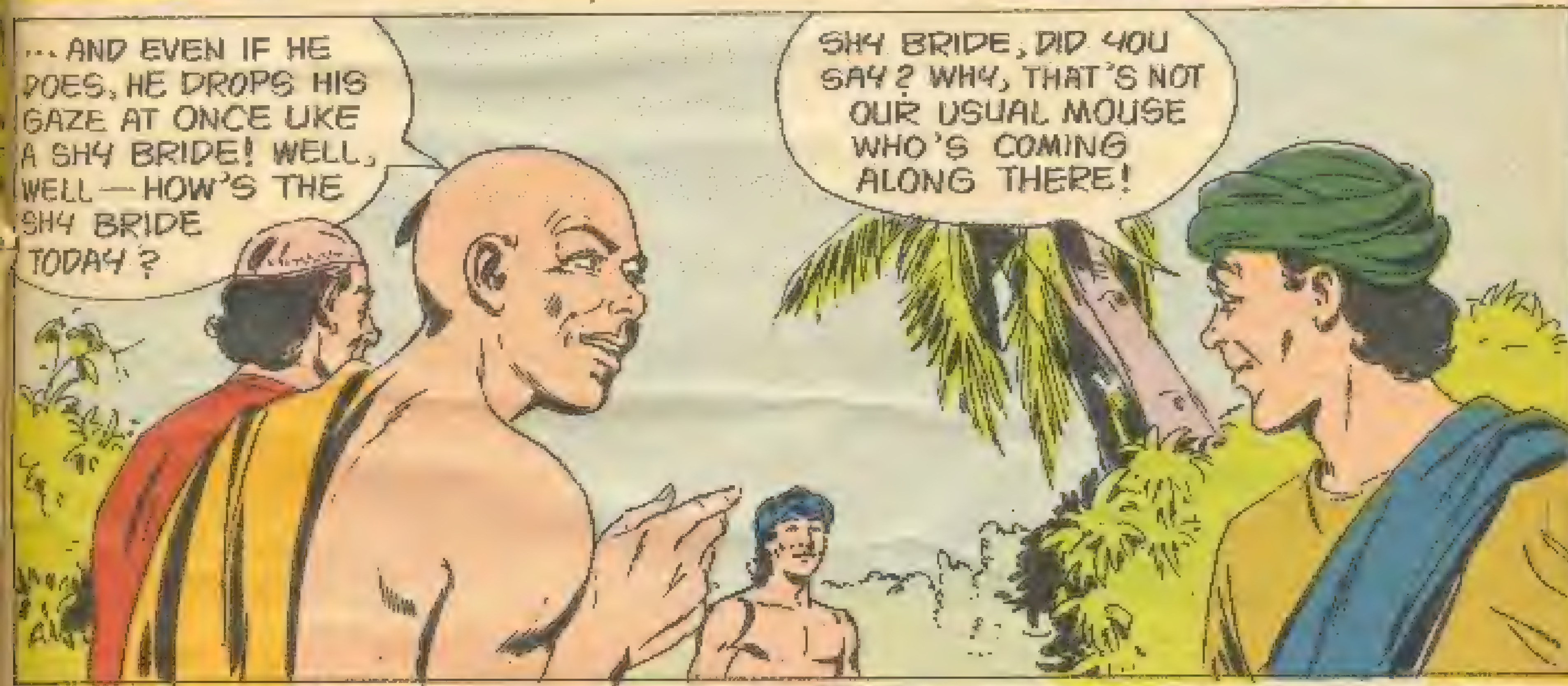

...WHAT OF US, ORDINARY MEN, WHO HAVE NOT REACHED YOUR STATE?


SHOW US SOME WAY. GIVE US A NEW IDENTITY...


A NEW IDENTITY? ALL RIGHT, I WILL GIVE IT TO YOU.

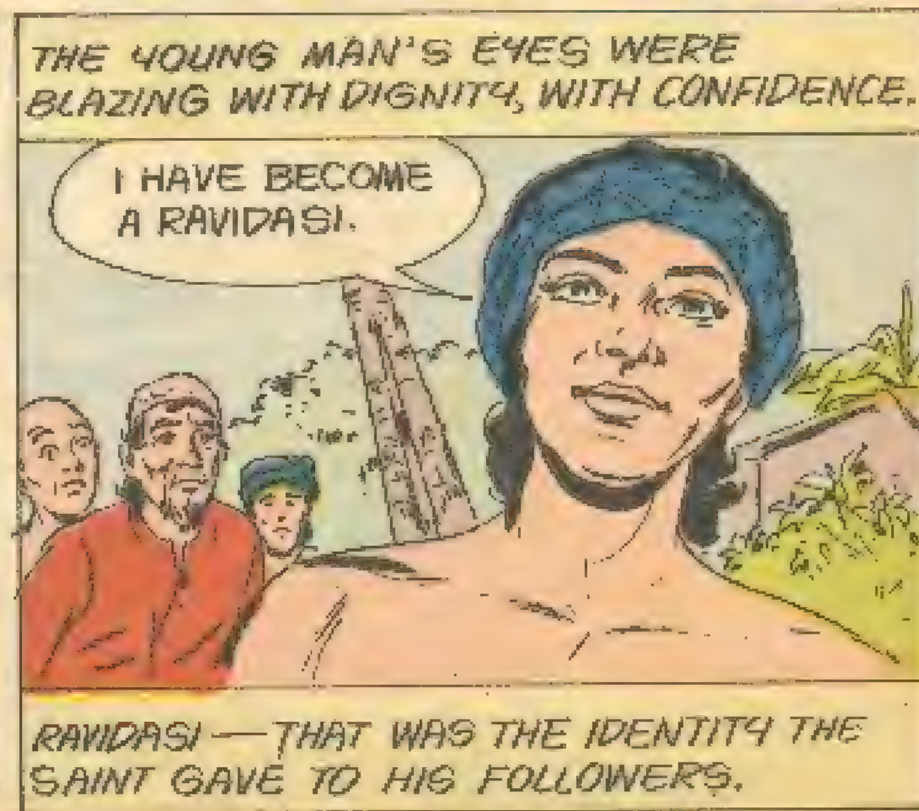
WHEN THE YOUNG MAN LEFT THE SAINT, THERE WAS A SPRING IN HIS STEP.



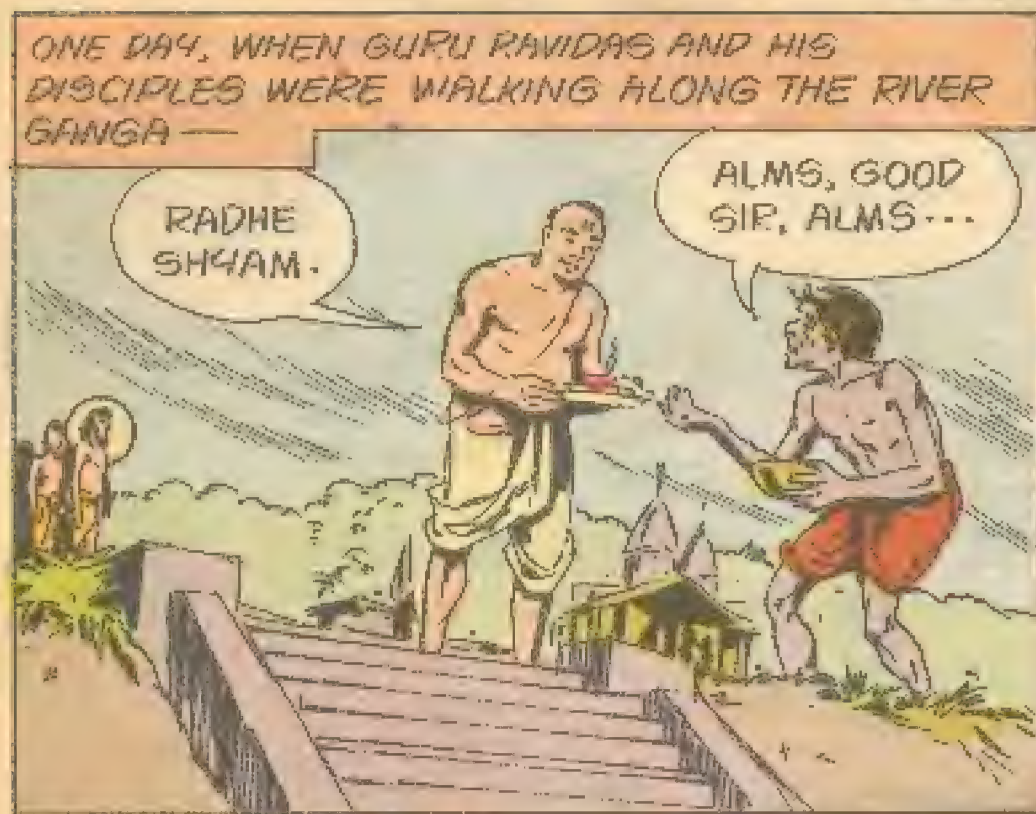




THE YOUNG MAN'S EYES WERE BLAZING WITH DIGNITY, WITH CONFIDENCE.



RAVIDASI — THAT WAS THE IDENTITY THE SAINT GAVE TO HIS FOLLOWERS.





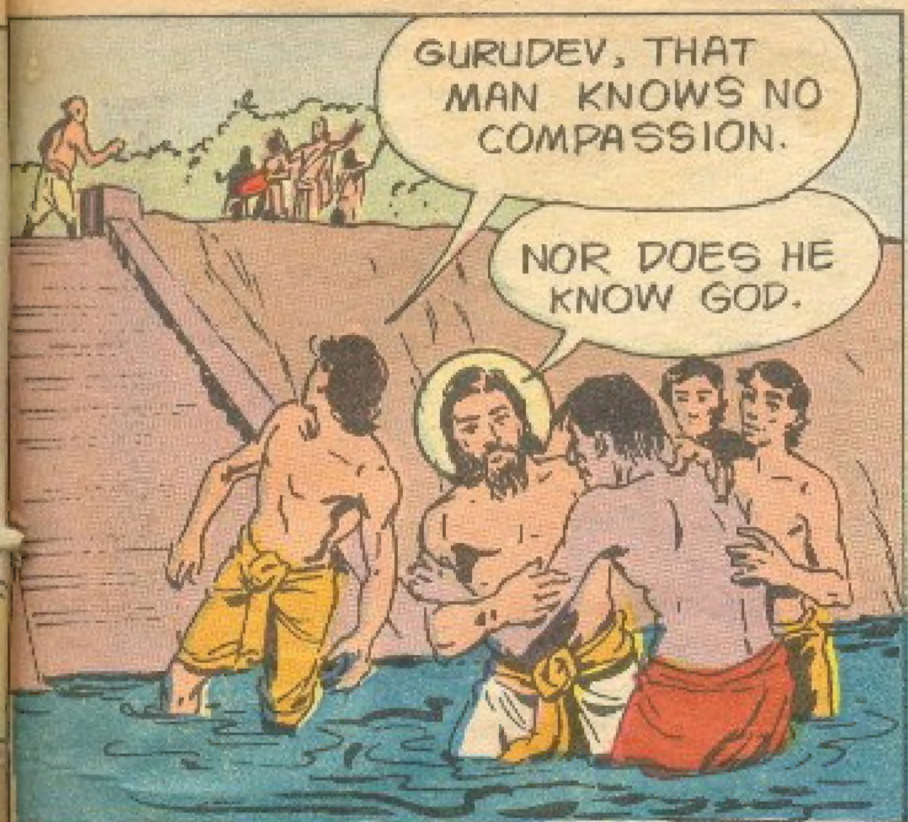


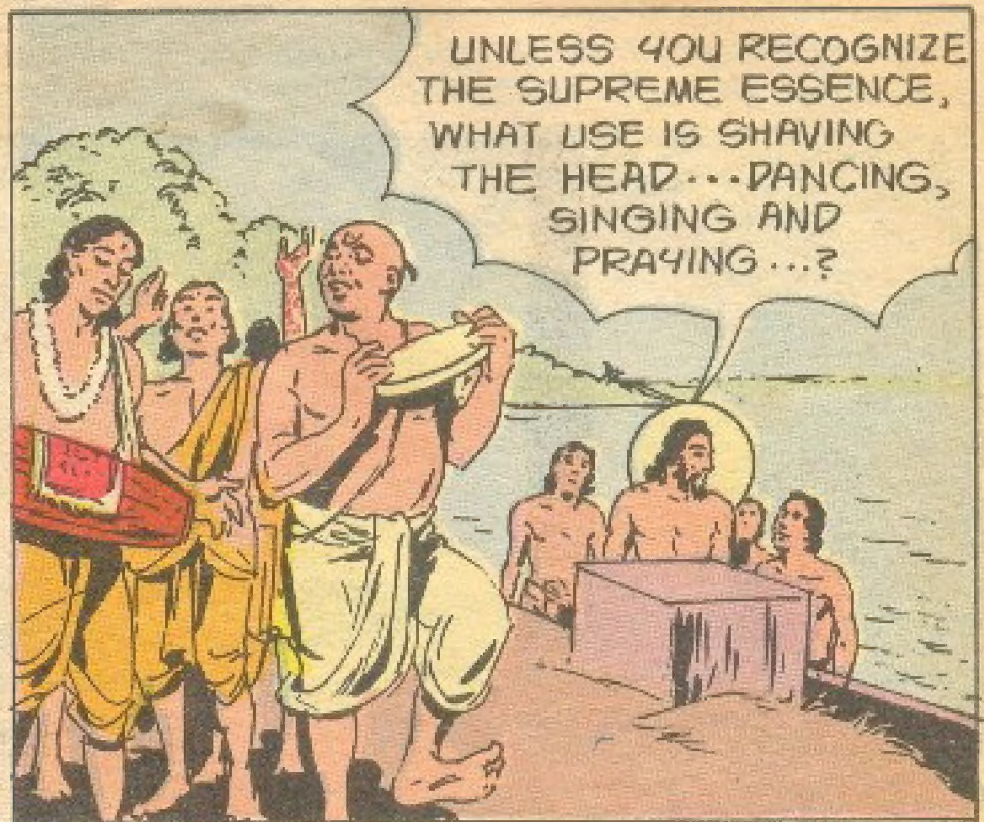




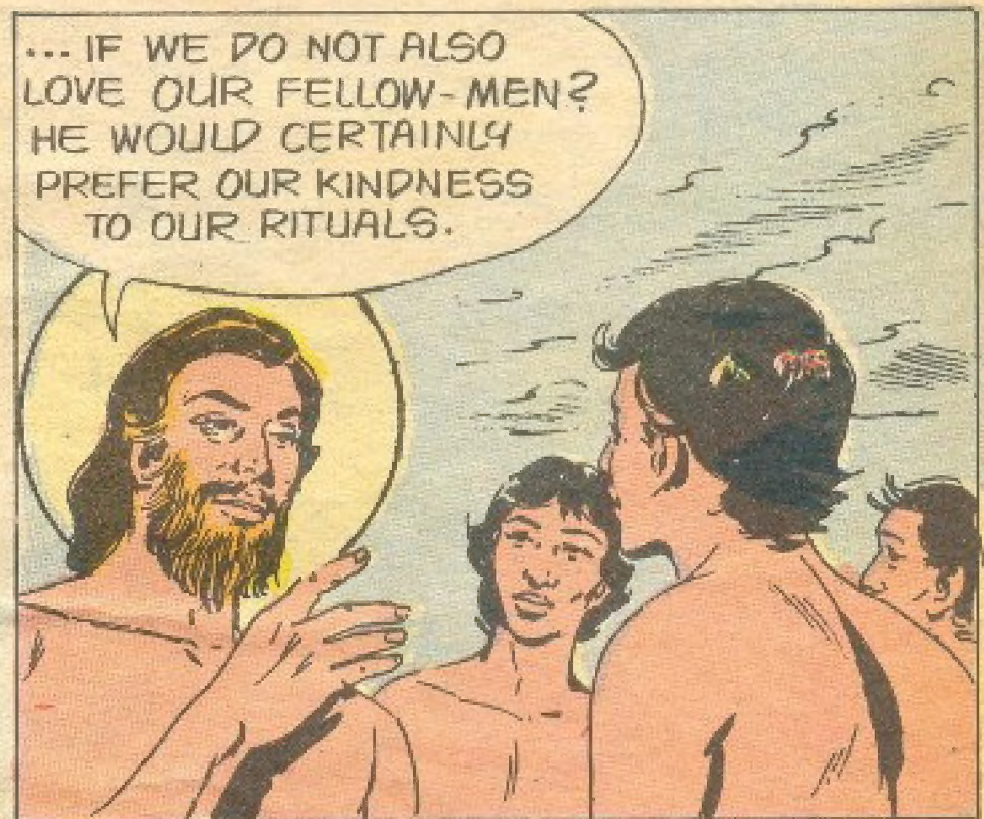


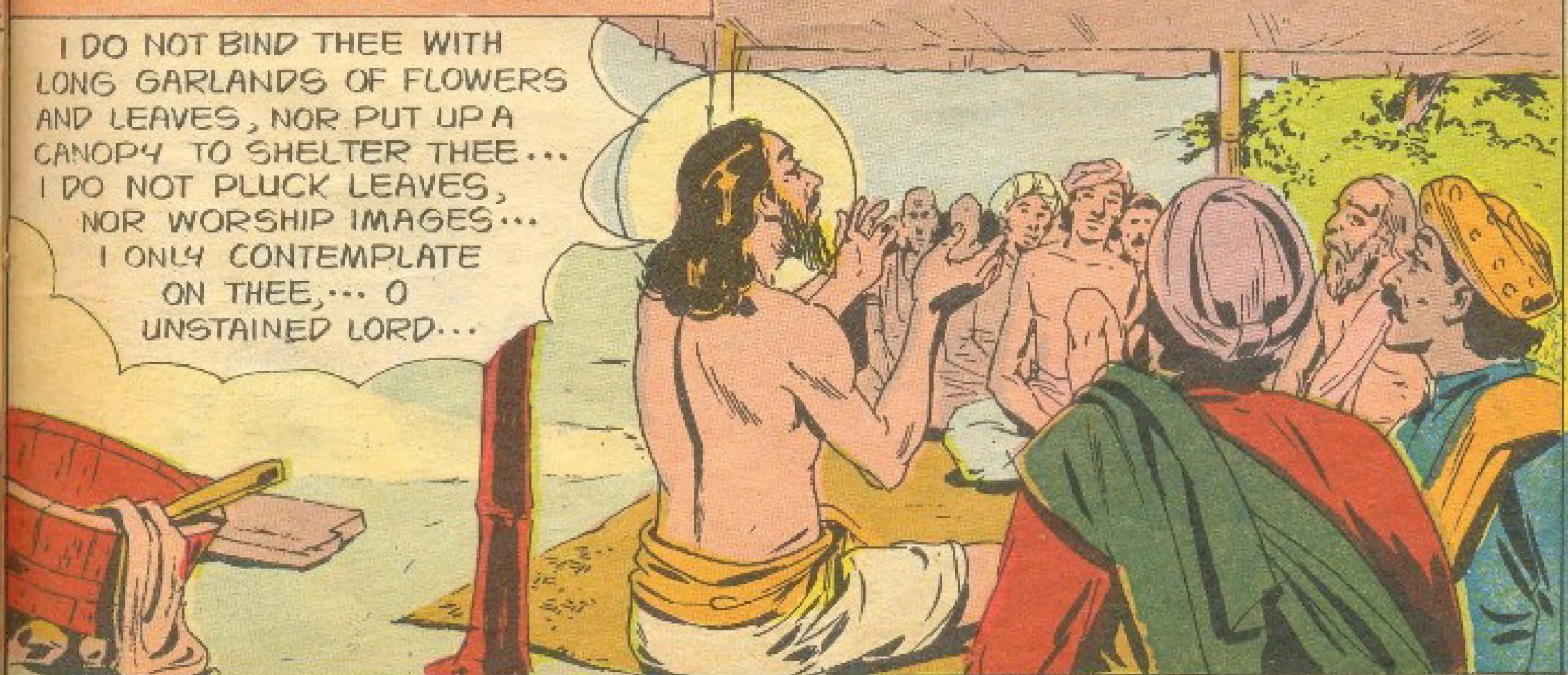
* GAYATRI CHANT (HOMAGE TO SAVITR, THE SUN GOD)


GURUDEV, THAT MAN KNOWS NO COMPASSION.
NOR DOES HE KNOW GOD.


UNLESS YOU RECOGNIZE THE SUPREME ESSENCE, WHAT USE IS SHAVING THE HEAD... DANCING, SINGING AND PRAYING...?


OF WHAT USE IS THE LAMP CEREMONY AND FIRE WORSHIP TO HIM IN WHOSE ONE HAIR THERE ARE CRORES OF SUNS...


...IF WE DO NOT ALSO LOVE OUR FELLOW-MEN? HE WOULD CERTAINLY PREFER OUR KINDNESS TO OUR RITUALS.


IN THE DAYS THAT FOLLOWED, THE NUMBER OF GURU RAVIDAS' DISCIPLES RAPIDLY GREW AS DID HIS BODY OF VERSE.
I DO NOT BIND THEE WITH LONG GARLANDS OF FLOWERS AND LEAVES, NOR PUT UP A CANOPY TO SHELTER THEE... I DO NOT PLUCK LEAVES, NOR WORSHIP IMAGES... I ONLY CONTEMPLATE ON THEE,... O UNSTAINED LORD...


HEARING OF RAVIDAS' GREATNESS, PEEPA, NANAK, SADHNA, SAINA, KABIR, OTHER SAINTS OF THE TIME CAME TO MEET HIM.
AND RULERS LIKE RAJA HARDEV SINGH NAGAR OF KASHI AND SIKANDAR LODHI OF DELHI PAID THEIR RESPECTS TO HIM.


ONE DAY, THERE WAS A KNOCK AT HIS DOOR.
WHO IS IT? COME IN.


THE DOOR OPENED AND THE CALLER SLOWLY CAME FORWARD.


I AM MEERA.
I HAVE HEARD OF YOU. COME IN.


I HAVE BEEN SENT TO YOU TO BE CURED. MY LOVE FOR MY HUSBAND HAS DRIVEN ME MAD.


YES. I CANNOT BEAR TO BE PARTED FROM HIM FOR EVEN A MOMENT.









AS THE DAYS PASSED GURU RAVIDAS SPOKE IN THIS STRAIN AND MEERA LISTENED. AND THEN ONE DAY SHE SET THE IDOL DOWN.



PEOPLE WHO ONCE SPURNED THE YOUNG COBBLER BOY NOW BOWED BEFORE HIM.

हरि हरि हरि हरि हरि हरि हरे।
हरि सिमरत जन
गए निसतरि तरे ॥१॥
हरि के नाम कबीर उजागर ॥
जनम जनम के काटे कागर ॥१॥
निमत नामदेउ दूधु पीआइआ ॥
तउ जग जनम संकट नहीं आइआ ॥
जन रविदास राम रंगि राता ॥
इउ गुर परसादि नरक नहीं जाता ॥३॥

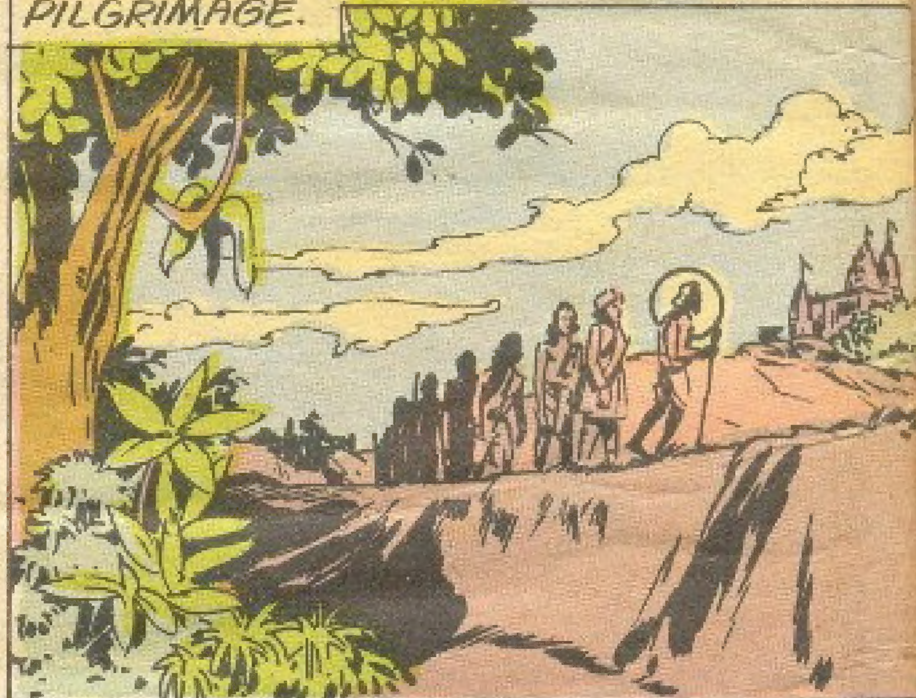


भाई रे राम कहाँ हैं मोहि बताओ
सत्य राम ताके
निकट न आओ ॥ टेक ॥
राम कहत सब जगत भुलाना,
सो यह राम न होई ।
करम अकरम करुणामय केश
कर्त्ता नांव सु कोई ॥ १॥
जा रामहिं सब जग जानत,
भरम भूलें रे भाई ।
आप आप ते कोई न जानें;
कहैं कौन सूँ जाई ॥२॥

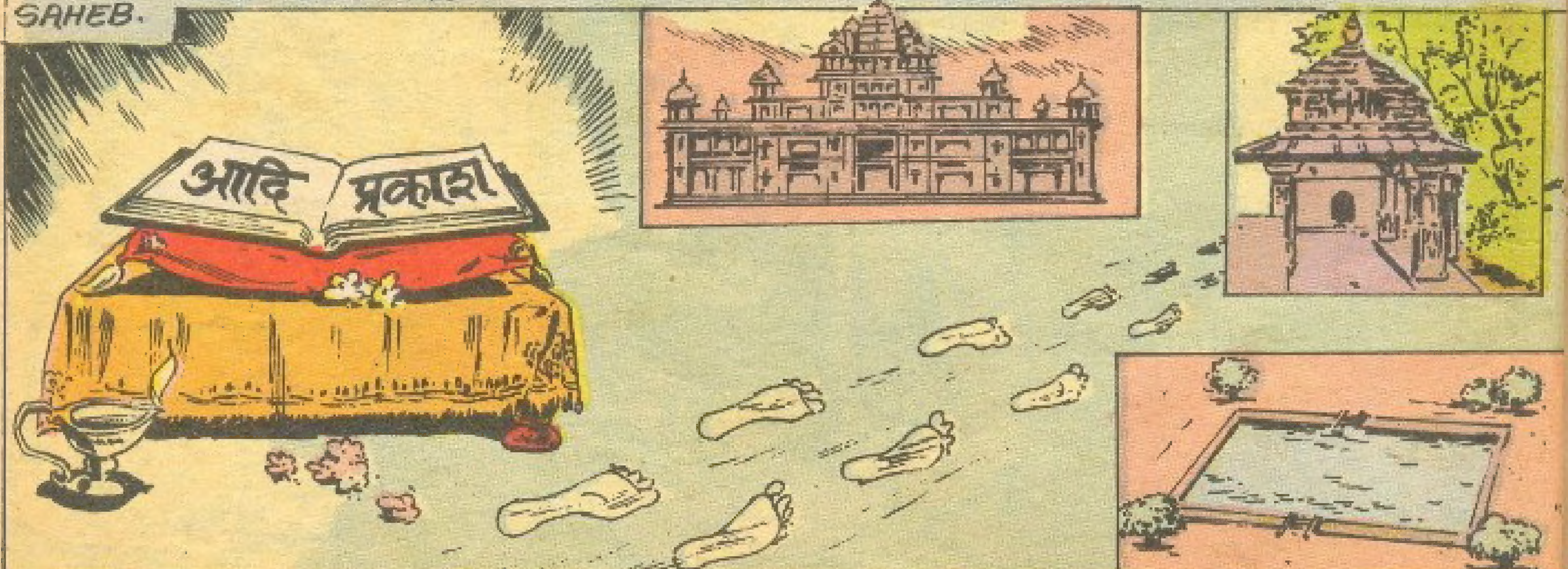
BUT TILL THE END OF HIS LIFE, GURU RAVIDAS WORKED AT HIS TANNING AND SHOE-MAKING.



TOWARDS THE END OF HIS LIFE, GURU RAVIDAS UNDERTOOK A LONG PILGRIMAGE.



WHEN HE PASSED FROM THIS WORLD, HE LEFT BEHIND HIM, THE RAVIDASI (THE SECT THAT BORE HIS NAME) AND HIS SIMPLE BEAUTIFUL BANIS*. HUNDREDS OF SHABDAS† OF THE GURU ARE PRESERVED IN "AADI PRAKASH", THE HOLY BOOK OF THE SECT. THIRTY-NINE OF THEM ALSO FIND A PLACE IN THE GREAT BOOK OF THE SIKHS — THE GURU GRANTH SAHEB.



AND DOTTED ALL OVER NORTHERN INDIA ARE SHRINES, PONDS AND ASHRAMAS BUILT IN HIS NAME

* SONGS ("BANI" LITERALLY MEANS "VOICE"). † LITERALLY 'WORDS'